

**STRATEGY  
RESEARCH  
PROJECT**

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**STRATEGIC VISIONS, WHY THEY FAIL**

**BY**

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### **Strategic Visions, Why They Fail**

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## **ABSTRACT**

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Much time is spent examining what makes good strategic visions, but little time or effort is expended determining why they fail to accomplish what they set out to do. This study examines problems with strategic visions, divided into categories relating to the vision itself, the leader or visionary, the followers and organizations themselves. Then the author compares these categories of problems to a case study, General Robert E. Lee's vision of the Gettysburg campaign, in order to validate the thesis that visions fail for predictable reasons.



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## **Strategic Visions, Why They Fail...**

### **Theories of Visions.**

During Course One at the Army War College, the Class of 1997 spent much time examining "Strategic Leadership" including what elements constitute a good strategic vision. But the central problem in contemporary leadership is not what makes a good vision, but why in large part people refuse to accept the vision of the leader or the organization as their own. Often organizations can learn more from failures than from successes.

This paper analyzes problems with visions in four broad categories: problems with the vision itself, problems with the leader or visionary, problems with followers, and finally problems with organizations.

Next a case study is presented to illustrate the practical applicability of the problem theory. The thesis of this research project is that strategic visions fail for predictable reasons. While the converse of this theory may not always be true, that visions which take this theoretical base into account will always be successful, there is surely a greater likelihood of success if the checklist is employed.

### **Problems with the Vision Itself.**

An ideal vision would have as a goal the possession of such universal appeal as to cause the members to perceive it as "An idea whose time has come." Inherent in this statement is the power associated with the vision itself, not merely with the visionary. Many problems occur with visions which prevent such widespread acceptance. The following "what if" examples provide some illustrations:

1. The vision is not ennobling. The ideal vision should be both ennobling (inspiring) and highly principled. It should touch the sources of meaning in people's lives. Vicktor Frankl in his book, *Man's Search for Meaning*, identified three principal sources of meaning: man's work itself, the pursuit of pleasure or love, and dealing well with suffering. A good vision should touch as many sources of meaning as possible<sup>1</sup>.

In order to draw from the source of meaning in people's lives, it is almost axiomatic that the ideal vision should be highly principled or "take the high moral ground". This is the principle of a "just war" or "just cause". During the Cold War, the avoidance of mutual destruction can be considered to be an organizing principle for our society. President Kennedy struck such a chord with his "pay any price, bear any burden, meet any hardship" inauguration speech in 1961<sup>2</sup>.

2. The vision doesn't touch multiple sources of motivation. Just like the Jews, Greeks and Romans of ancient times, different types of people are motivated by different aspects of life. The Jewish culture revered their traditions over all else. The Greek culture of the day was a respecter of knowledge. And the Roman culture admired accomplishment or "doing". The ideal vision should have elements that allow people with different sources of motivation and with diverse backgrounds to draw strength from it.

3. The vision does not consider the needs of all stakeholders. Many visions and their accompanying mission statements come across as selfish. If the needs of all stakeholders in the organization are not considered, the vision and accompanying mission statement will not have balance. Without a balanced perspective, large-scale ownership of the vision or mission throughout the organization is nearly impossible<sup>3</sup>.

Dr. Stephen Covey, in his book, *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*, talks about the importance of considering the needs of the various stakeholders in organizations. For example, if a corporation has a vision or mission statement that

essentially states that the vision of the company is to enhance the asset base of the stockholders, then many of the needs of the stakeholders in that company have their needs unrecognized. Obvious omissions include the community in which the organization exists and the employees<sup>4</sup>.

Covey predicts that the end result will be a climate which is not harmonious, to say the least. In such an organization, there will be a devisiveness which exists because the members of the organization cannot integrate the other dimensions of their lives with the activities of the organization. He predicts that in the lives of the organization members that there will be continual dilemmas trying to reconcile the competing demands of the organization with unmet stakeholder needs.

4. The vision does not achieve consensus. The ideal vision should be something about which the entire organization can come to consensus. Some corporate trouble shooters who take over struggling or failing businesses say that the most important thing that can be done to reverse such a business is to find out which of the employees believe that the business can be fixed and help the rest to find new employment. That is a rather extreme approach to achieving consensus on the organization vision, but it makes the point. A true consensus is usually more difficult and time-consuming to achieve<sup>5</sup>.

5. The vision does not have a unifying impetus. Another way of saying this is that the vision doesn't have the power to pull the organization into the future. If the vision is ennobling, motivating, considers the needs of the stakeholders and achieves consensus, it should have a unifying effect on the organization. A tension exists between the organization as it exists now and the future view of the organization (the vision). A good vision should have the effect of pulling the organization from its present state into the future (desired end state)<sup>6</sup>. President Kennedy's vision of "a man on the moon by the end of the decade" was such a vision.

6. The vision is not realistic. The vision can be unrealistic in several ways. In the War College curriculum one model of strategy is to consider the “ends”, “ways” and “means” (to accomplish the ends). The ends can be considered to be the vision or end state. The ways are the strategies for getting to the end state. And the means are those resources, (personnel, equipment, funding) to be used to get to the end state. Any disconnect of ends, ways or means can cause the vision to not be realistic<sup>7</sup>.

Another way that the vision can be unrealistic is in the assumptions that underlie the strategy or vision. Because we cannot have all facts when planning and dealing with uncertainty, we must make certain assumptions about the future. The nature of assumptions is such that if the assumption is invalid, it invalidates the plan. In the state of Louisiana, before 1980, it was assumed that oil and its byproducts would always be above \$20 per barrel. (At one point, financial planning was even based on oil at \$30 per barrel.) Oil then went to \$12 per barrel. Hence the assumption invalidated the vision.

It is an important element of a plan to state the assumptions up front. Another way for the vision to be invalid as above, is for an assumption to be unstated and invalid, or become invalid. (An unstated assumption that remains valid is not a problem.)

7. A vision is not worth the cost to individuals in the organization. If the vision has a bad balance between what it costs and its potential benefits, even to individuals, then it may receive less than wholehearted support. This is a relative comparison of the relationship between the ends and the means available. In the final analysis, it is a matter of being practical, a form of pragmatism. If individuals feel that the vision of the organization is not worth their time, it can cause that vision to fail.

8. A vision is too transformational or not conceivable. If an individual has no basis or experience with which to relate to the vision, to that person the vision is not

conceivable. In essence, we are asking that person to visualize an unknown or the unknowable. General Sullivan as Chief of Staff of the Army faced that problem with the “digitizing” the battlefield. The answer that he talks about in his book, *Hope is Not a Method*, he calls the “thin thread” technique. He explains that we need to run a “thin thread” back from the future vision to the present in order for people to “see” a vision that is very transformational<sup>8</sup>.

Under his guidance, the Army created the Battle Labs and the Advanced Warfighting Experiments for warfighters to be able to see and touch the future. General Sullivan knew that without the “thin thread” to help visualize the potential of digitization that it would be impossible to generate the commitment and energy needed to transform the Army<sup>9</sup>.

Another example from a different discipline is the problem in the 1860’s of getting farmers (who are notoriously stubborn) to change their management practices to “transform” American agriculture. The answer lay in the creation of the Land Grant University System with its demonstration farms so that farmers everywhere could see the effects of improved management practices. The most productive agricultural system in the world resulted<sup>10</sup>.

A vision can be unbelievable or not understandable in several ways. If known facts or circumstances must be perceived in a different way than exists presently, then a paradigm shift must occur for the vision to be believable. Dr. Stephen Covey, states in his books that important break throughs are almost always “break withs” (tradition). In order to begin to deal with disease transmission in medical facilities the “germ theory” of disease transmission had to be perceived. The facts and circumstances were the same as before. Now there was a different paradigm applied to those facts. Germs that were always present caused disease<sup>11</sup>.

A vision can also be too complicated to be easily understood. There is a great deal to be said for the expression “simplicity is beauty”. In fact, in software design, engineering and fashion the simplest solution that accomplishes the desired objective is called the elegant solution.

For the vision to work, it must be sufficiently flexible. The Army expression, no plan ever survives contact with the enemy, is true. To help deal with ambiguities of a plan, the military develops “branches and sequels” of the plan. Sufficient intellectual “what if...” drills need to be conducted to ensure that the vision or plan is still valid if things proceed to an alternate reality (a branch). By the same token, the notion of a sequel is to include greater (or lesser) than anticipated success as one of the planning considerations<sup>12</sup>.

### **Problems with the Leader or Visionary.**

A second category of problems with visions are associated with the leaders (visionaries) themselves. Three subcategories of problems associated with leadership include: character flaws, not being convincing as a leader, and a lack of competence. There are as many potential character flaws as there are potential leaders, since no leader is perfect. The following may serve as examples:

The Selfish/Self-serving or Egotistical Leader. This person may, by the perception that he or she is self-serving, prevent the vision from ever being accomplished. It would require an exemplary follower to follow through on the vision in such circumstances. President Ronald Reagan is said to have had near his desk the quotation, “There’s no limit to what a man may accomplish, so long as he doesn’t care who gets the credit.”

The Authoritarian Leader. In his book, *Military Misfortunes*, Eliot Gould paraphrases psychologist Norman Dixon to say that generals who fail often have self-

defeating character traits. They are passive, courteous, obstinate and rigid, ambitious and insensitive. This is a psychological description of anal retentive. Dixon says that they get to the top because that psychological bent has certain militarily desirable institutional characteristics. The anally retentive are characterized as cautious, adhering to rules and regulations, respecting and accepting authority, obeying their superiors and regarding discipline and submission to authority as the highest of virtues<sup>13/14</sup>.

Yet they lack the flexibility, imaginativeness and adventurousness to be good commanders. To quote Dixon, "Here, then, lies the heart of the problem, the inevitability of disaster: 'Authoritarianism, itself so damaging to the military endeavour, will actually predispose an individual towards entering the very career wherein his restricted personality can wreak the most havoc.' It is like learning that only people with Parkinson's disease decide to become eye surgeons."<sup>15</sup>

The Undisciplined Leader. According to John Keegan, there are two overarching traditions at West Point. One is to professionalize the officer corps originally with appropriate scientific study in such subjects as ballistics, fortifications and civil engineering. The second is to civilize and discipline the warrior class of the country. Of these, building the disciplined leaders who can be counted upon to accomplish missions on the battlefield is probably the most difficult. All military training programs aim to produce a high order of discipline.<sup>16</sup>

The Untrustworthy Leader. In his book, *Principle-Centered Leadership*, Stephen Covey makes the distinction that individuals must be trustworthy in two ways, in character and in technical competence. People would never go to a doctor for surgery if they thought he might do unnecessary surgery (because he was unethical), even if he was proficient as a surgeon. Likewise people wouldn't go to the most ethical surgeon they know if they felt that he lacked competence in his surgical skills. Both are necessary<sup>17</sup>.

A second category of vision problems associated with the leader is for the visionary to not be convincing as a leader. In their 1993 book, *Leadership and Information Processing: Linking Perceptions and Performance*, Robert Lord and Karen Maher assert that leadership is not solely in a leader or solely in the followers. It involves behaviors, traits, characteristics and outcomes interpreted by followers. Leader is a summary label perceived by followers.<sup>18</sup>

Lord and Maher state that followers perceive these labels through both "recognition" and "inference." Recognition is based on preconceived ideas of what a leader should be and, secondly, through an inference of leadership traits based upon outcomes (track record). So it is possible for leaders to not be convincing as leaders if they don't fit the mold of traits/behaviors attributed to "a leader" commonly held by that group of followers or society.<sup>19</sup>

John Keegan in *The Mask of Command*, identifies three distinctively different military leadership models as they have developed through history. These are the heroic leader, the anti-heroic leader and the un-heroic leader<sup>20</sup>. In his book, *The Power of Followership*, Robert Kelley states that in Western Society has been engaged in "leader worship" for over 3,000 years<sup>21</sup>. The "Great Man" theory of history extended by Thomas Carlyle in 1841 in his book, *On Heroes, Hero Worship, and the Heroic in History*, has codified this doctrine: that Great Men are the "inspired text of that divine Book of Revelation"<sup>22</sup>.

No Track Record as a Leader. The second way mentioned earlier by Lord and Maher to be recognized as "a leader" is through inference or outcomes. Things happen in organizations. If subordinates assess the outcomes to be positive and perceive that the leader's actions are linked to that outcome, then recognition as a leader will be attached to that person. Obviously, a person with no track record then cannot be perceived as a leader if he does not "fit the mold".<sup>23</sup>

The third category of problems with leaders is a lack of competence. The leader competencies fall broadly into two areas: failing to do the intellectual work of the “first creation”, and poor management and leadership skills.

Failing to do the intellectual work of the “first creation”. In any creative act there are two separate steps. The first step of perceiving what must be done and the second of actually doing it. A good example of the two creations is in the techniques of an architect.<sup>24</sup>

First he must decide what he is going to build and how to build it. This is the intellectual work for the vision or the first creation. His completed first creation will be a model or “vision” of the desired outcome or end state. He may actually build a physical model. Then he moves on to the second step, construction<sup>25</sup>. In a military model, the model of the end state is the vision or end state (sometimes called commander’s intent). The second creation is the execution of the plan<sup>26</sup>.

Invalid Assumptions. This has already been mentioned in the “problems with the visions themselves” section of this paper. If the vision is flawed due to the use of an improper assumption, then the visionary failed in doing the intellectual work of the first creation<sup>27</sup>.

Failure to consider organization “internals”. Dr. Robert Murphy in his teaching Strategic Management at the War College has two groups of considerations to be made as part of the intellectual work for the vision<sup>28</sup>.

According to Dr. Murphy one must consider the organization “internals” or things affecting the organization internal posture such as its management, marketing, finance/accounting, programming/operations/management techniques, research and development programs and information systems<sup>29</sup>.

Failure to consider organization “externals”. Dr. Murphy suggests that the organization external environment consists of such factors as the economic, social, cultural, demographic and legal/political environment in which the organization finds itself<sup>30</sup>. The externals may also be considered part of the strategic environment.

Wrong frame of reference. Visionaries are responsible to “frame” issues upon which they must decide. Like a window frame, the placement of which determines the view of the world seen through the window, the framing of issues is part of the intellectual work of the vision<sup>31</sup>.

The classic example of poor framing is the battle between Pepsi and Coke for market share. For years, Pepsi tried to outdo Coke to produce a better bottle. Pepsi perceived that much of Coke’s success in the marketplace was due to its distinctive bottle. Only when they began to consider how beverages were actually used did they realize that the question had been improperly framed. They had been asking, “How can we produce a better bottle than Coke?” When they began to ask the question, “How can we better package Pepsi to meet the needs of the consumer?”, large (liter sized) packaging resulted, along with an increase of market share<sup>32</sup>.

Outdated paradigm. A vision that is not believable because it requires a paradigm shift to understand it has been mentioned in the problems with the vision section. But there is another way that the intellectual work of the vision can be flawed, by the use of an outdated paradigm. Another way to illustrate this is to ask the question, do you think that Steve Jobs could have had the vision for Apple Computer had he retained the “IBM” paradigm that computers were big expensive machines owned by large corporations?<sup>33</sup>

A changed paradigm can be akin to a changed strategic environment. Ford Motor Company perceived that cars were built in certain price ranges when they built

the Edsel. They resented being the stepping stone for buyers moving up from Ford to the more expensive General Motors cars. In response they created the Edsel. When they perceived that automobiles could be built for a particular lifestyle, not just for a price range like the Edsel, the company developed the Thunderbird and then the Mustang<sup>34</sup>.

The second major area of leader competency is in management and leadership skills. Once the intellectual work of the first creation is complete, the visionary must use his leadership and management skills to enable the vision to work.

Poor communicator. The visionary must be capable of good communication, normally both orally and in writing in order to communicate the vision. This involves use communication techniques understandable to the whole organization. This is in itself a complex interaction involving both knowing the nature of the organization and adapting the communication technique to it.

Poor decision-maker. The leader must be able to make the decisions necessary to implement the vision. Sometimes the most important question is how is the question framed that one is going to decide<sup>35</sup>.

Can't teach necessary skills. The leader must be able to teach necessary skills to the organization. The most important skill to teach is for the organization to be able to learn from itself and its experience.

Doesn't learn/grow with the organization. The leader must learn and grow personally with the organization, as well as to help it to grow. According to General Sullivan, the only real failure is the failure to learn.<sup>36</sup>

Not a good enough motivator. The leader must be a motivator for the organization. This idea, too, was discussed earlier.

Can't help the organization evolve. The leader must help the organization evolve. This includes changing its structure and functions as needed<sup>37</sup>.

Reflection skills. As General Sullivan attributes to LTC Moore during the battle in the Ia Trang Valley in Vietnam, even under the most dire circumstances, an effective leader must allow time for reflection. The leader must continually ask three questions: (1) What's happening? (2) What's NOT happening? (3) What can I do to influence the outcome<sup>38</sup>?

### **Problems with Followers**

A third category of problems with visions are associated with the followers which implement the vision. This is the second creation mentioned in the section above on doing the intellectual work. These problems fall in four major areas: lack of competence, lack of followership, inadequate visioning, and teamwork.

Lack of competence. What are the areas of competence expected of followers or the implementers? Again, as with the leader, this is broken down into character flaws and technical skills.

Character flaws. As with the leaders, there are many potential character flaws. Each of us alternates between periods of followership and periods of leadership all of our lives, both in a chronological manner as we go through life and also as we change roles each day<sup>39</sup>.

The effect of being lazy or lacking motivation, is to lower the threshold of the cost/benefit ratio or the means/ends equation. If the leader, visionary or team developing the vision attributes a certain amount of motivation to those who must

implement the vision, having less motivation than normal has the effect of killing the vision.

The cost of self-serving followers is the same as having self-serving leaders only individually on a smaller scale. In his book, *The Power of Followership*, Robert Kelley states that the most a leader can expect to affect an organization is about 20%. But he believes that the followers *collectively* contribute the remaining 80% of what is possible in an organization<sup>40</sup>.

The effect of lack of discipline on the part of the followers is to diminish the 80% contribution that they could make. This may also be reflected by the ability of the group to focus on a task, to persevere to accomplish it, to deny self and overall can be assessed as the level of maturity of the group. (One definition of maturity is the ability to delay gratification.)<sup>41</sup>

Poor self image. This may be manifested in statements like “old dogs can’t learn new tricks” or “we can’t do THAT...”. A technique mentioned earlier which was called the “thin thread” technique can help to overcome resistance in this instance<sup>42</sup>.

Each individual brings to his work certain technical skills at which he is expected to be competent. In addition, two more problem areas are lack of an ability to see the vision of the leader and lack of foresight. They are listed here instead of as a character flaws. The reason this approach was utilized was because a continued period of association with a forward thinking organization can enhance or correct part of this deficiency.

If followers cannot see the vision of the leader, it may be that no one has ever asked the followers to look at the “big picture” of the organization with them. Or that they have grown up in an organization where their contribution was undervalued. Or that they have grown up in organizations where due to “leader worship” they were

somewhat released from the responsibility to act on their own<sup>43</sup>. The notion of a paradigm shift is such that once the paradigm is explained with enough clarity or demonstrated in a visible way, most can observe it.

The lack of foresight/vision also properly called vision can be tested and measured. General Motors in their early aptitude testing developed measures to quantify this trait. Most people have never considered their ability to see into the future. And there are advantages and disadvantages to having varying amounts of foresight. Those with less foresight can probably focus more fully on the task at hand. And will probably enjoy life more in the present, because the present is more real to them. To those with greater foresight, the future is not different than to others, it is simply more real. They can see future events with greater clarity, and thus choose to react differently to it<sup>44</sup>.

The second area is problems with followership. A series of issues together and lumped into problems with followership may also be one of the major deficiencies in organizations today, and probably with western society also. If Robert Kelley is right in his thesis in *The Power of Followership*, we have worshipped our leaders for millennia<sup>45</sup>. This manifests itself in a number of ways.

Followers who lack confidence in their leaders are often disappointed by the performance of their leaders. The leader may not measure up to their expectations because of the particular mental leadership model that the follower has. As I discussed in the “problems with leaders” section, those who don’t have the traits and behaviors most commonly associated with “a leader” are at a distinct disadvantage in our society. The remaining course of action for them is to build a “track record of success” to which leadership may then be attributed<sup>46</sup>.

According to Kelley, there is often an accompanying lack of a followership model in those who lack confidence in their leaders. And a corresponding number lack

of understanding of their role. Since most of spend much more time as followers than as leaders, this is a significant problem<sup>47</sup>.

When followers cannot understand their roles as followers, it is reasonable to expect them to be disappointed with their leaders, since it is difficult to draw the line between leader/follower. It is much easier to blame all problems on the leadership<sup>48</sup>.

If the followers expect to have leaders of heroic proportions, (since there are very few such people) they expect to have leaders bear a larger portion of the burdens of an organization. In a sense, worshipping the leaders and assigning them heroic qualities releases the followers from some or possibly a large part of the responsibility for the outcomes of the organization. Additionally, if the leader is assigned heroic qualities, false linkages between the leader's actions and organizational outcomes may be assumed<sup>49</sup>.

So what then are the qualities of an exemplary follower? And what is this followership model? According to Kelley, the exemplary follower is an independent thinker with active involvement in the processes and leadership of the organization. They are "deal makers" not "deal breakers". They use their skills assume some of the burden of the organization and remain responsible for their share of the outcomes. In the use of their energies and talents they complement the leader strengths. They have adequate to exemplary job skills (technical skills). They have adequate to exemplary organizational skills. They have values which support their personal, the leader's and organizational goals<sup>50</sup>.

A third major area of follower problems is in the issue of vision and the visioning process. Many times they lack confidence in the strategic vision being able to accomplish what it purports to achieve. Additionally, there may not be time or the motivation to achieve consensus on the vision. Without the involvement of the mass of the followers, there may be lack of a sense of ownership (or buy in) to the vision. Many

organizations feel ill-prepared to commit the time and resources necessary for buy-in at the lowest level.

A fourth major area of follower problems is team-building skills or their lack. The essence of the teamwork issue is, “what can the team agree to do that its members are willing to subordinate our own selfish desires to?” To be an exceptional team, there must be consensus on the level of commitment its members are personally willing to commit to and a willingness to be held accountable to that level.

To further amplify some of the issues in team-building, there are numerous approaches to building high-performing teams. To contrast just two approaches consider the examples of the 1978 Yankee baseball team and the 160th Aviation Regiment.

This can be called the “Superstars versus Superteam” approaches. George Steinbrenner in the late seventies decided that he had the resources to put together a baseball team to win the World Series. His approach basically was to “buy all superstars and put ‘em together”. His approach worked and amid lots of bickering and jockeying for position his superstars won the World Series--and then went their separate ways whenever the opportunity presented itself. They contracted to win the World Series and they did. They didn’t contract to like it though.

The 160th Aviation Regiment is a different example. It could be called it the superteam approach. The “Night Stalkers” are the helicopter regiment for Special Operations Command, and they are arguably the finest aviators in the world. But when talking to the people in the regiment, egos are not apparent--they don’t have the egos of superstars. In fact, other aviators will tell you that they’re not that different than any other aviation unit. They just have no bad or weak pilots. In other words, what is average performance in another unit is the standard or minimum acceptable performance in that unit. (There is no bottom end on their bell curve.)

These approaches to team-building are very simplistic examples of a complex problem, but the bottom line comes back to what (standards, goals) can be agreed upon that members are willing to subordinate our own self-interests to?

Having several classes or divisions of citizens in an organization can affect team-building. General Joulwan's approach to this issue (using a sports example) is a good one: one team, one fight!<sup>51</sup>

Not valuing diversity. This subject is given lip service often, but is diversity really valued? The more homogeneous an organization is, the quicker communication is (code words are used which communicate a lot with few words) and quicker decisions can be made. Because there are more experiences in common. But the organization may not get the benefit of a divergent viewpoint that keeps it from making a mistake. (There is less total experience in the group, but life is easier.)<sup>52</sup>

The organization doesn't meet expectations. Another reason for a lack of teamwork is that the organization doesn't meet our expectations. "I didn't join the Army to do this..." It requires extraordinary discipline to follow through on commitments when anyone has already mentally left an organization.

### **Problems with Organizations**

The fourth (and final) category of problems with visions are associated with the organizations themselves. Eight basic areas of organizational problems contribute to the failure of the organization to accomplish (achieve) its vision.

Lack of critical mass. Like the critical mass of a nuclear explosion, there is a certain concentration of talent that is necessary for an organization to become high-

performing. This begins to talk to the concept of synergy which is observable in both biology and organizations<sup>53</sup>. In engineering and physics similar concepts may be involved in both harmonics and resonance.

The concept of a synergistic effect in medicine for example, is the use of two drugs in combination whose effect is greater than using either alone. This is a kind of one plus one equals three equation.

Organizationally, a swim team coach explained that it takes “two studs” to have a great swimming team. One outstanding individual alone will not draw the team along with him, but two or more outstanding individuals competing with each other out in front will improve the performance of the whole team.

Lack of resources. The single most frequent reason for business failure is lack of resources. Sometimes this is a failure to plan properly. Sometimes the lending institution is short-sighted in its lending policies. The resources are not entirely financial, although the nature of economics is to convert dissimilar resources to currency. Some of the intangible assets of an enterprise are mentioned in the above discussion of critical mass—a certain concentration of talent, for example and synergism.<sup>54</sup>

An organization can be too big. Communication theory has it that above the initial minimum number of people (organisms) to communicate (two), the more people (organisms) that are added to the group the more complex the interactions become to coordinate its activities. An organization with four members requires more than twice as many communications to coordinate its activities to coordinate its activities before. In other words, as an organization gets bigger, communications required are not a linear correlation with its size<sup>55</sup>.

Just as an organization hits a “critical mass” as it increases in size (and gets better) an organization hits a point in size where it collapses under its own weight. This is often due to communication complexities, (sometimes called bureaucracies and inertia). To accomplish something in such an organization, requires extraordinary effort to move the bureaucratic mass.

Many of the extraordinary organizational accomplishments in recent years have occurred due to the creation of a “skunk works” where a few extraordinarily talented people are empowered and concentrated away from the bureaucracy and allowed to work as a small team to accomplish a specific mission<sup>56</sup>. The Manhattan Project to create the atomic bomb during World War II and the small groups put together to develop the SR-71 spy plane and other advanced technology aircraft fit this mold.

It is also possible for an organization to fail because it has inadequate feedback systems or networks. In the military, this could consist of the Inspector General (IG) function, for example. It could also include exit interviews of departing employees, customer surveys, decision audits and others. In *Decision Traps*, Russo and Schoemaker discuss cultural aspects that tend to stifle the feedback loop. They include a culture that thinks it is responsible for its own success, one that rationalizes its mistakes or one that tends to distort reality in hindsight by lack of record-keeping of “ground truth”.<sup>57</sup>

Identity of its own that may not be known to the leader. Sometimes when a new leader takes over an organization, there may be a significant part of its identity that is unknown to the new leader and otherwise invisible. It may have developed this concept of itself in its activities of the past. An institution that perceives itself in a certain way may not be capable of responding to the new leader as appears necessary, until that old identity is modified. In a human relationship this could be referred to as emotional baggage.

In human relationships, many people tend to perceive this concept of “baggage” as a negative. However, it can be either positive or negative. In some circumstances, a negative outcome in the past can be a source of significant strength<sup>58</sup>.

In *Hope is Not a Method*, General Sullivan tells the story of a very intense battle fought in Vietnam by Lieutenant Colonel Hal Moore and the troopers of the 1st Battalion, 7th Cavalry in 1965. In retrospect, the battle was a test of how the Americans would fight against regular units of the North Vietnamese. Eventually the unit was relieved after fighting surrounded and outnumbered four or five to one for four days. The unit lost over half its men<sup>59</sup>.

Unknown to the Vietnamese, the 1/7 Cav was the unit led to annihilation by George Armstrong Custer in the battle of the Little Big Horn. Almost one hundred years later, one reason that Lieutenant Colonel Moore and the 1/7 Cav troopers fought so valiantly was that they were determined not to let history repeat itself--it would not happen again!<sup>60</sup>

Collective Incompetence and “The Military Mind”. This is the straight forward idea of collective military incompetence. In his explanation of why General Ambrose Burnside persisted in attacking the Confederate army at Fredericksburg in 1864, Charles Fair could only claim that “the man who is by temperament and physique close to the going tribal norms tends to rise, no matter how stupid he is.”<sup>61</sup>

In his novel, *The General*, C.S. Forester asserts that “an army encourages and intensifies potentially dangerous habits of mind...”. The answer to the carnage of the Western Front of World War I lay in the developing of a doctrine that emphasized flexibility over rigidity and innovation to long-established ‘principles’<sup>62</sup>.

Institutional Failure. In his book *Military Misfortunes*, Eliot Cohen states that the US Navy as a whole was blamed when they did not adopt the practice of convoying

ships in 1942. Likewise, the whole French army was criticized for the French collapse in 1940<sup>63</sup>.

Cohen, in his explanation of the failure of the tactical doctrine of the French in 1914 when General Ferdinand Foch believed that morale was stronger than firepower, found three factors: “a long tradition of French intellectual arrogance”, “a collective lack of brains, where the intellectual quality of the French officer corps (had) experienced a long decline”, a desire for the doctrine to conform to the organizational ideology and institutional aims<sup>64</sup>.

“Belief in the offensive protected the standing regular army and created suspicion and doubt about the capabilities of reserve forces...” Yet many of the other armies of the time believed in the efficacy of the tactical offensive, so the French were neither more arrogant or stupid than anyone else<sup>65</sup>.

The flip side of the same coin of institutional failure, was the unparalleled success of the German army of both world wars. Cohen has identified six factors from various writers affecting the success of the German institution. The excellence of the German general staff system. A greater spirit of professional dedication among German junior officers. More rigorous and effective training. Closer attention to tactical doctrine. A high degree of institutional integration. Willingness to subject both success and failure to close critical examination<sup>66</sup>.

Cohen thinks that this type of analysis is more useful than simply “garlanding heroes” and “castigating villains”. We must begin to study institutions to see how they work not what they are. And to do that we must think of our armed forces as organizations, not just institutions<sup>67</sup>.

Cognition Theory suggests that “Disaster-provoking events tend to accumulate because they have been overlooked or misinterpreted as a result of false assumptions,

poor communication, cultural lag and misplaced optimism. Three Mile Island is a good example. A number of factors combined in unforeseen and unexpected ways... A good lesson-- in peace and in war, men operate in environments in which events are only partly the result of controlled decisions taken by the person "in charge"<sup>68</sup>.

The importance of the political psychology of failure. Especially the role of expectations built up by those undertaking a venture. A good example, the Ford Edsel. Ford built up itself to itself and to the public (through the press) the notion that the Edsel was going to be an extraordinary success. Had they built up expectations less, the failure would have been less humiliating<sup>69</sup>.

In business studies, one of the questions students seek to answer in studies of failure is "How did the corporation find itself in such an inherently fragile position?" One of the things that a corporation (organization) must preserve is its ability to adapt to change and uncertainty...<sup>70</sup>

Often the answer to the question lies in the nature of success itself. In both a biological and organizational framework, the definition of success is being well-adapted to the environment, or the most successful is the best-adapted to the environment. Just as in biology, a high level of biological adaptation in one environment leaves the organism particularly vulnerable in a new environment.

Consider the value of its adaptation for a stark white snowshoe rabbit if it found itself in a jungle. The nature of success (adaptation to the environment) may leave the adaptor particularly vulnerable if the environment changes. At which time, the less successfully adapted (but more flexible) organism would be favored.

## A Case Study -- General Robert E. Lee at Gettysburg

The following case study is illustrative of some of the major problems with poor strategic visioning. The time is 1863. The leader is General Robert E. Lee.

After the Battle of Chancellorsville, Virginia, in May of 1863, General Robert E. Lee met with President Jefferson Davis in Richmond to recommend a plan for a new campaign. Lee was convinced that the Army of Northern Virginia should proceed into Maryland and Pennsylvania, draw the Army of the Potomac away from Washington, and win a decisive victory on Northern soil. The results of such a victory could have major military effects, as had the Battle of Waterloo in 1815 which forced Napoleon's abdication. Likewise such a victory could have major diplomatic and strategic results as had the Battle of Saratoga in 1777 which culminated in the French-American alliance during the American Revolution.

Both Lee and Davis were familiar with the concept of the decisive battle to end a war. Davis, who graduated in the Class of 1828 from West Point, and Lee who graduated just one year behind him, had both studied the Campaigns of Napoleon at the U.S. Military Academy. In any limited war, they reasoned, the enemy would be compelled to "count the cost" following a major defeat. In the most favorable situation public sentiment and war weariness would pressure the Lincoln Administration to sue for peace. Even in a less favorable strategic analysis, since 1864 was an election year, a major Southern victory might cause Lincoln's electoral defeat with the same final result.

Given such a rosy analysis, Davis approved Lee's plan. The vision of the campaign called for Lee to cross the Potomac with the mountains as a screen to his east. Major General J.E.B. Stuart would lead half of his Confederate cavalry to the east, riding around Hooker's Federal Army, to further confuse the enemy. Lee hoped that by the time the Union forces learned that he had left the Fredericksburg-Chancellorsville area, he would have stolen several days' march into Pennsylvania.

Lee's intended route of march led from Williamsport (W. Virginia) to Chambersburg to Harrisburg, Pennsylvania. Stuart's cavalry would ride east through Maryland to Dillsburg and link up with Ewell's Confederate Corps somewhere between Chambersburg and Carlisle. Once the Army of Northern Virginia was united, there would be a major push to capture

Harrisburg, the capitol of Pennsylvania, fighting such battles as were necessary.

There were several strategic problems with Lee's vision and therefore with his operational plan. His supply lines would extend up the Shenandoah Valley into the Cumberland Valley and would grow longer with each passing day. His infantry were short of shoes and his supply of ammunition was limited to what his wagons could carry or what Stuart could capture.

If he did manage to cross the Susquehanna and capture Harrisburg, with or without a fight, he had no follow-on plan. The Army of the Potomac, which would surely out-number him, would be to his south. State militia units from Pennsylvania, New Jersey and New York would form to oppose his further advance. Indeed, there were already Pennsylvania militia units at Harrisburg which could be used to destroy bridges and impede river crossings until the Army of the Potomac could catch up.

Moreover, if Lee lost a great battle north of Carlisle, there was not another major Confederate force to protect Richmond from the kind of military power which the Union would undoubtedly muster to march south. The Union did not regard the Civil War as a limited war, for Lincoln's strategic objective was to keep the Union intact. The operational objective of the Union Armies after 1862 was the unconditional surrender of all Confederate forces. Short of a major political disaster for Lincoln, the Union would not be deterred by the loss of one great battle as Second Manassas, Fredericksburg, and Chancellorsville should have proved even to Lee and Davis. To say that Lee's "invasion" was a strategic gamble is an incredible understatement<sup>71</sup>.

### **Comparisons with Theories of Visions**

Problems with the General Lee's vision. Using the model above, the vision for the Gettysburg campaign had an ends, ways, and means mismatch. Had General Lee won the battle it is likely that it would not have won the war.

One of the principal reasons is that some of the underlying assumptions of the vision were wrong. The assumption that the Army of the Potomac was fighting a limited

war was a bad one. That fed into another assumption, that a decisive victory would win the war. That the North was fighting using the Napoleonic model of warfare was a third questionable assumption after 1862.

Additionally, the vision did not achieve consensus, even with General Lee's top officers, notably LTG Longstreet. In short, the vision for the Gettysburg Campaign was not believable.

Problems with the visionary (General Lee). General Lee failed to do the intellectual work for the vision. Without the intelligence from his cavalry (General Jeb Stuart) it was not possible for his assumptions for the battle to be correct.

He also had an improper frame of reference, in that the Army of the Potomac was not fighting a "Napoleonic War". The notion of a Napoleonic war was to win one big, decisive victory which would then force the enemy to come to the table to negotiate a peace. Unknown to General Lee, General Grant and President Lincoln were already beginning to wage a war using the "Total War" concept. They recognized that it would require the total military and industrial might of the North to completely crush the South and thus preserve the Union.

General Lee was also operating from an outdated paradigm. That of the invincibility of the Army of Virginia. Although the early battles had a different tone, he didn't learn and grow with the Army. Clearly the Army of the Potomac was stronger and better led from Fredericksburg on.

Problems with the followers. General Longstreet lacked confidence in General Lee's strategic vision. This was documented in the battles for Little Round Top and on the occasion of "Pickett's Charge". The indications are that General Pickett didn't believe in the vision for the frontal assault. He didn't lead his men from the front that

day as he normally would. He also didn't show the character to either lead his men into battle or change his boss's mind about the plan.

## **Conclusions**

In general, Western culture has had an unrealistically high expectation for its leaders for hundreds if not thousands of years. Oftentimes this is manifested by the notion that the most senior people in an organization have all the good ideas. Until the time one reaches the managerial level, there are no good ideas. This notion is also manifested in corporate compensation packages for the "man at the top". Some consider this a form of leader worship, engaged in by our culture.

The new realities of our world and society are that new definitions of success must be determined, since the organizational concepts are changing. Organizations are becoming flatter, with fewer opportunities to "reach the top of the pyramid". Information Age definitions of success must be more in keeping with a new model, that may more closely resemble a symphony orchestra or hospital staff than the former "military" model.

New systems for training organizational members to be "exemplary followers" are in order. In addition to the leadership training most common today, organizational members need to understand how to fulfill their responsibilities to support the leadership in the organization's quest to fulfill the organizational vision.

In the case study, General Lee's loss at Gettysburg opened the door for President Lincoln. The loss at Gettysburg allowed Lincoln the opportunity to present his ideas in what has come to be called the Gettysburg Address. At the time, it shaped the American notion of democracy. It introduced the concept of "one man, one vote"

and “protection for civil liberties” which were novel for the time. Hence there is a very real caveat for visionary leaders. Failure to use a systematic model in developing an implementing a strategic model may not only lead to defeat for a given strategy, but it may also give the opposition a golden opportunity to utilize a better plan of their own. In short, visions which fail for predictable reasons may lead to quite unexpected and unwelcome secondary effects.

## **Appendix A -- A Vision Checklist**

### **A. Theories of Visions**

- 1. Problems with Visions -- Goal - "An idea whose time has come..."**
  - a. Not ennobling (worth my time)**
  - b. Bad cost (means)/benefit (ends) ratio (a form of pragmatism)**
  - c. Not realistic**
    - (1) Ends, ways, means mismatch**
    - (2) Assumptions wrong**
      - (a) Stated**
      - (b) Unstated**
  - d. Not conceivable (too transformational)**
    - (1) "Thin thread" technique needed**
      - (a) Battle Labs/AWE**
      - (b) Demonstration farms of the 1860's**
  - e. Does not consider the needs of all stakeholders**
    - (1) Doesn't touch the source of meaning of life**
      - (a) Work**
      - (b) Pleasure**
      - (c) Going through suffering**
    - (2) Does not achieve consensus**
  - f. Not believable**
    - (1) requires paradigm shift (different perception of known)**
    - (2) too complicated**
  - g. Not flexible (No plan ever survives contact with the enemy)**
    - (1) Branches, "What if's..."**
    - (2) Sequels, "Plan for success..."**

- h. Doesn't touch multiple sources of motivation
  - (1) tradition
  - (2) knowledge
  - (3) accomplishment
- i. Not a unifying impetus (No pull)
- j. Not principled - "take the high moral ground..."

## 2. Problems with Leaders (Visionaries)

- a. Selfish/Self-serving/Egotistical "no limit to what a man may accomplish, so long as he doesn't care who gets the credit"
- b. Not convincing as a leader
  - (1) Doesn't fit the mold of traits/behaviors attributed to "a leader"
    - (a) "Great Man" Theory of History, 1841 -- Thomas Carlyle,  
On Heroes, Hero Worship, and the Heroic in History
    - (b) Leadership Models from History
      - 1. Heroic -- Alexander the Great
      - 2. Anti-Hero -- Wellington
      - 3. Un Heroic -- Grant
      - 4. False Heroic -- Hitler?
  - (2) No track record
- c. Lacks competence
  - (1) Fails to do intellectual work for the vision (1st Creation)
    - (a) Invalid assumptions
    - (b) Consider organization "internals" (internal posture)
      - [1] Management
      - [2] Marketing
      - [3] Finance/accounting
      - [4] POM
      - [5] Research and development

[6] Information systems

(c) Consider organization “externals” (environment)

[1] Economic

[2] Social

[3] Cultural

[4] Demographic

[5] Legal/Political

(d) Wrong “frame” (frame of reference)

(e) Bad paradigm (“Road map of terrain”)

(2) Poor communicator

(a) Right brain

(b) Left brain

(c) Word Pictures

(3) Lazy

(4) Lack of discipline

(5) Not trustworthy

(a) Character (Talent vs Character)

(b) Technically

(6) Poor decision-maker

(7) Can't teach necessary skills

(8) Doesn't learn/grow with the organization

(9) Not good enough motivator

(10) Can't help organization evolve

d. Doesn't pause to reflect

(1) What's happening?

(2) What's NOT happening?

(3) What can I do to influence the outcome?

3. Problems with Followers (2nd Creation)

a. Lack competence

(1) character

- (a) focus
- (b) perseverance
- (c) self-denial
- (d) maturity (ability to delay gratification)

(2) technical skills

- b. Lazy/Lack motivation
- c. Self-serving
- d. Lack confidence in their leader (expectations)
- e. Lack confidence in the strategic vision
- f. Cannot achieve consensus on the vision
- g. Cannot see vision
- h. Poor self image
  - (1) Old dogs can't learn new tricks
  - (2) We can't do THAT...
- i. Can't understand their role...
  - (1) Leader worship/leader prototypes
  - (2) Hero leadership model releases them from their responsibility
  - (3) Perceived linkages between leader actions and outcomes
  - (4) Exemplary followers --
    - (a) Independent thinking with active engagement...
    - (b) "deal maker not deal breaker".
    - (c) complement leader strengths
      - [1] Job skills
      - [2] Organizational skills
      - [3] Values
  - j. Lack of discipline
  - k. Lack of teamwork

(1) what can we agree to do, that we are willing to subordinate our own selfish desires to?

(2) Superstars vs. Superteam

(a) 78 Yankee Baseball Team (George Steinbrenner)

"buy all superstars...put 'em together"

(b) 160th Aviation Regiment "no bad apples (pilots)"

(3) Divisions/Classes of citizens in team vs. 1 Team, 1 Fight

(4) Don't value diversity

I. Lack of ownership (buy in) of the vision

m. Lack of foresight/vision

n. Organization doesn't meet expectations (I didn't join up to do this...)

#### 4. Problems with Organizations

a. Lack of critical mass

b. Lack of resources

c. Too big (communication theory)/too many interactions required

d. Inadequate systems/networks

e. Identity of its own that may not be known to the leader

f. Collective Incompetence

g. Institutional Failure

## ENDNOTES

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<sup>2</sup> David Newton Lott, Inaugural Speeches of the American Presidents, from Washington to Kennedy, (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1961), p 269.

<sup>3</sup> Stephen Covey, The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1989), pp 139-143.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Gordon R. Sullivan and Michael Harper, Hope is not a Method (New York: Random House, Inc., 1996), pp 172-179.

<sup>7</sup> course I

<sup>8</sup> Sullivan and Harper, pp 177-179.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., p 117.

<sup>10</sup> Christian K. Arnold, "Colleges, Land-grant", in Encyclopedia Americana, International Edition, 1996 edition, p 239.

<sup>11</sup> Covey, Principle Centered Leadership. (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1991) p 67.

<sup>12</sup> Sullivan and Harper, pp 137-139.

<sup>13</sup> Eliot A. Cohen and John Gooch, Military Misfortunes: The Anatomy of Failure in War (New York, The Free Press, 1990), pp 8-10.

<sup>14</sup> Norman F. Dixon, On the Psychology of Military Incompetence (London: Jonathan Cape, 1976) p 94.

<sup>15</sup> Cohen and Gooch, p 9.

<sup>16</sup> John Keegan, The Mask of Command (New York, Penguin Books USA, Inc., 1987), p 178.

<sup>17</sup> Stephen Covey, Principle Centered Leadership, p 171.

<sup>18</sup> George R. Dodge, reviewing Robert G. Lord and Karen J. Maher, Leadership and Information Processing: Linking Perceptions and Performance (Boston, Unwin-Hyman, 1991).

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Keegan, pp 311-315.

<sup>21</sup> Robert Kelley, The Power of Followership (New York, Bantam Doubleday Dell Publishing Group, Inc., 1992), pp 7-10.

<sup>22</sup> Thomas Carlyle, On Heroes, Hero Worship, and the Heroic in History (Boston, Houghton, Mifflin, 1907), pp XXXII-XXXVI, pp 339-340.

<sup>23</sup> Dodge.

<sup>24</sup> Covey, The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People, pp 99-103.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Arthur F. Lykke, Jr., "Toward an Understanding of Military Strategy" in Military Strategy: Theory and Application, Carlisle Barracks, Pennsylvania, U.S. Army War College, 1993, p 3.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., p 23.

<sup>28</sup> Robert Murphy of the U. S. Army War College, interview by author, 7 April 1997, Carlisle, PA.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> J. Edward Russo and Paul Schoemaker, Decision Traps (New York, Simon and Schuster, 1989), pp 2-11.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Covey, The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People, pp 24-31.

<sup>34</sup> Cohen and Gooch, pp 19-21.

<sup>35</sup> Russo and Schoemaker, pp 1-11.

<sup>36</sup> Sullivan and Harper, pp 193-210.

<sup>37</sup> Sullivan and Harper, pp 155-165.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., p 65.

<sup>39</sup> Kelley, pp 7-10.

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Hudson T. Armerding, The Heart of Godly Leadership, (Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway Books, 1992), p 13.

<sup>42</sup> Sullivan and Harper, pp 177-179.

<sup>43</sup> Kelley, pp 19-24.

<sup>44</sup> Interview, Johnson O'Conner Research Institute, interview by the author, July 1982, Ft. Worth, TX.

<sup>45</sup> Kelley, pp 19-24.

<sup>46</sup> Dodge.

<sup>47</sup> Kelley, pp 123-147.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> Dodge.

<sup>50</sup> Kelley, p 129.

<sup>51</sup> Sullivan and Harper, p 118.

<sup>52</sup> Covey, The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People, pp263-284.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

<sup>55</sup> Jacob Wolfowitz, Coding Theorems of Information Theory (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey, Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1961) pp 91-93.

<sup>56</sup> Michael A. Cusamano and Richard W. Shelby, Microsoft Secrets (New York, The Free Press, 1995) pp 73-90.

<sup>57</sup> Russo and Schoemaker, pp189-209.

<sup>58</sup> Sullivan and Harper, p 67.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

<sup>61</sup> Charles Fair, From the Jaws of Victory (New York, Simon and Schuster, 1971), p 270.

<sup>62</sup> Cohen and Gooch, p 14.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., p 15.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., p 19.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., pp 19-20.

<sup>71</sup> Barry Zais, "Gettysburg Lecture and Staff Ride," (Carlisle, Pennsylvania, U.S. Army War College, 1996).

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